
Faction of city task force won't present dissenting report on health benefits

SAN ANTONIO — A faction of a public safety retirement and health care benefits task force that wanted to present its “minority report” challenging the full group's analysis has backed out of a scheduled public meeting with the City Council, citing fears of retaliation from City Manager Sheryl Sculley.

Jerry Cortes, a firefighter who sat on the task force, emailed council members Tuesday, formally notifying them that the four members of the minority faction decided against making a presentation at a March 19 council meeting. Some of them harbor “significant concerns” raised in a Sunday San Antonio Express-News column by Gilbert Garcia, who wrote that Sculley had indirectly threatened public relations firm KGBTexas because of its contract with the San Antonio Fire and Police Pension Fund — a separate entity from the San Antonio Police Officers Association and the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association.

KGB ended its contract with the pension fund last week in order to step out of the growing fray.

Sculley has denied making threats and called the unions' actions distractions from the core issue of public safety costs growing faster than revenues.

Cortes and others were prepared to discuss their minority report, which challenges data and analysis compiled by the task force, at the February council meeting, when task force chairman Reed Williams presented the group's findings.

They're no longer willing to do so.

“We firmly stand by our report and we will continue to meet with the mayor and council to answer any

questions they may have on the minority report we submitted on Feb. 19 but feel that further public discussion of this topic, based on what appears to be the city manager's current strategy, is not worth the professional and financial risk to ourselves and our families,” Cortes wrote in his email to the council.

Katie Harvey, CEO of KGB, said in a written statement that she was “angered” by the unions' use of her firm as a “political football in their clash” with city officials.

“The simple truth is that the city and the police and firefighters associations are engaged in a dispute,” she wrote. “We acted to remove the agency from that dispute in order to preserve our reputation and our relationships throughout the community.

“Let me make this clear. No one from the city asked us to resign the Fire and Police Pension Fund account. By misrepresenting the facts and trying to drag KGBTexas back into a dispute in which it is not involved, the associations have, unfortunately, confirmed the wisdom of that decision.”

In response to Cortes' email, Sculley sent her own to the council.

“It's unfortunate that the unions have resorted to these tactics. The facts are clear: Public safety expenses are growing faster than general fund revenues, crowding out other important city services — streets, parks, libraries, health and human services,” she wrote. “Task force members, task force consultants and city staff are prepared to continue a public dialogue about health care costs. The task force offered numerous recommendations to address the fact that public safety health care benefits are excessive as compared to other public safety departments in Texas, as compared to civilian city employees by two and a half times, and as compared to employers in the region and nationally.”

She said in an interview that “we're disappointed that they won't participate in a public discussion.”

City officials plan to hold the March 19 meeting, in which Sculley and members of the task force will present more information on public safety benefits. City officials said late Wednesday that the dissenting faction of the task force has been invited to reconsider participating.

Collective bargaining agreements between the city and its public safety personnel are set to expire in September. Meanwhile, union and city officials are gearing up for negotiations over new contracts, which include salaries and health care.

Last summer, Sculley told the council during a meeting on the fiscal 2014 budget that if left unchecked, the cost of providing public safety in San Antonio would consume the entire general fund — about

\$1 billion — by 2031. Mayor Julián Castro called for forming a task force, which when convened amassed 13 members representing diverse interests, including the city, the business community and both active-duty and retired public safety personnel.

It quickly became evident that the task force members would never fully reach a consensus on how the city should proceed. Ultimately, Williams presented broad findings in February that recommended the city address several issues, among them the rising cost of health care.

jbaugh@express-news.net